GOD NEAR: GOD FAR
Isaiah 6:1-9, Romans 11:33-12:2
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In a delightful and light-hearted book about the art of corporate worship Colin Morris, a British Methodist, writes in a way that many Protestants will understand:

> "I had a bad start. My earliest memories were of mahogany pews with squeaking doors, an aspidistra in a hideous urn on the communion table and 'Worship the Lord In The Beauty of Holiness' in flaking paint above the pulpit. Only much later did I learn that liturgy means 'the work of the people'. We didn't do any; just sat like blocks of wood except when we rose to sing hymns or recited the Lord's Prayer. For the rest, the preacher got on with it, telling God in prayers of interminable length what was happening in His own world and telling us in the sermon what miserable sinners we were and how Drink was ruining the nation. An hilarious time was had by all. Had it not been for a nubile soprano with a saucy eye in the choir I should probably have been a happy atheist by now..."
> (The Word and the Words, p.90-91)

Morris is writing autobiographically, of course, but I sense that we know what he means. Earliest memories of corporate worship are not particularly pleasant for many people; and the blunt fact that the majority of church members decide every Sunday not to attend this exercise indicates that childhood memories have not always been corrected by adult experience.

The American poet, Robert Lowell, in Waking Early Sunday Morning, describes a sleeper, near the ocean in Maine, contemplating the day ahead. Shall he, or shall he not, go to Church? The poet writes:

> "O Bible chopped and crucified
> in hymns we hear but do not read,
> none of the milder subtleties
> of grace and art will sweeten these
> stiff quatrains shovelled out four-square
> they sing of peace and preach despair..."

The poet concludes that a better idea by far is to stay home and spend the morning rummaging in the woodshed.
(See Theology Today, April 1976, p.18-19)

To the despair of every minister most people make something like that decision every Sunday morning. Part of the reason, I propose, is that they do not understand what we are about in this hour. And part of the reason,I propose, is that we don't know either; that for many of us what happens between eleven o'clock and noon - optimistically, is a combination concert and lecture with some curious activities attached fore and aft to round out the hour.

Thus, a sermon on worship, a reflection on what we are doing at the moment, an invitation to think historically, biblically and critically about this exercise which, we keep claiming, is at the very heart of our life as a church. In short, why bother coming - when you could be doing so many other things?

One of the peculiarities of humankind among all the animals is that we, alone apparently, have the capacity for self-consciousness. We have the bothersome ability to think about what we are doing, to step outside ourselves, as it were, and contemplate our situation. We, alone among animals, can look beyond ourselves. In The Courage To Create, Rollo May asks, "Is it not the distinguishing characteristic of the human being that in the hot race of evolution he pauses for a moment to paint on the cave walls?" (Preface, p.vii,viii)

And Douglas Steere writes that our deepest need is to be in relationship with the highest we know, to offer up the best we have, and that something essential to our humanity dies when that right is denied. (Prayer and Worship, p.44)

The philosopher Pascal concluded that the best evidence for the existence of God is that human beings seem to need Him; that God, Himself, calls this curious self-transcendence, this looking beyond ourselves, out of us. Somewhere he wrote, "You would not have sought Him had you not already found Him."

If we turn to our family album we will discover a few pictures of our own: Moses, for instance, removing his shoes before a burning bush, or Isaiah, in the Old Testament Lesson, sitting in the Temple mourning the death of his friend, King Uzziah, and being overwhelmed with a sense of God's reality and majesty and transcendence.

Christian worship attempts something very ambitious; namely, to hold up the idea that there is a God, that He exists beyond our time - space orientation, that He is ultimate, infinite and quite far from our experience of reality, in the idiom of academic theology, God is transcendent.

The idea has not been without its problems. It has been consistently suggested that if God is apart, holy, remote, then people must somehow rise above the confines of normal bodily and mental existence in order to be in touch with Him. When the Appalachian Holy Roller becomes stiff as a board and falls to the floor in a kind of trance, he is engaging in behavior and expressing an idea as old as history itself, namely that God is experienced when a person leaves ordinary physical and mental processes behind. That, I believe, was and is the fascination with LSD and other hallucinogenic drugs: they seemed to lift the user out of ordinary existence and deposit him on a higher plane. And it is no accident that former LSD users frequently describe their experiences in religious terms.

I was fascinated to learn a little bit about the Cult of Mythras this summer, a very prominant religion in Rome in the first century. Digging beneath a church in Rome archaeologists have discovered an apparatus used by the Mythras Cult. On the first floor is a room with benches around the periphery and a dramatic statue of a bull in the center. There are tiny holes in the walls and in the ceiling above. During initiation rites a bull was slaughtered in the room above and its blood drained through the holes onto the initiates below who were engaged in a frenzied dance around the statue. Candle light was beamed through the holes in the wall, and the total effect was not unlike the psychedelic mode of a contemporary discotheque. The initiation experience was one of religious ecstacy: the psycho-somatic shock of light, music, blood and dancing created a trance in the initiate which was regarded as an experience of God. The Greek word for the experience is the root of "metamorphosis", and for obvious reasons it isn't found very frequently in the New Testament. St Paul, however, took a risk in our New Testament Lesson

this morning and used it. Notice the very important sequence - God is described in transcendent language: "O the depth of riches - How unsearchable his judgments and inscrutable his ways." And then - "present your bodies - be transformed" - there it is, "metamorphosis": "be transformed by the renewal of your mind."

That is to say, Christian worship intends to put people in touch with the mysterious "Ground of Being", but not by way of an ecstatic trance. Rather, the mind, the precious human capacity for rational thought, is to be fully engaged and part of the way we do it.

God is far - but He is also near. Christian worship maintains that the same Holy God who dwells in mystery and transcendence, also draws near. Thus Isaiah does not just sit in the sanctuary enjoying the sensation of holiness. God comes to him, his lips are touched and he has a conversation with the Almighty. The very essence of Christian worship is that in Jesus Christ God has shown His face: that He has to do with us personally: that He cares about us and all the details of our living: that He wants us to be in as intimate relationship with Him as a child with his own parents.

The two ideas: God Near and God Far, I believe, are absolutely essential to the practice of worship. What has happened in the Churches of the Reformation, however, is that the emphasis has been rather totally placed on the intellect: we have become suspicious of feelings, emotions and our worship has become a sometimes rather staid process of thinking about God. At the time of the Reformation the liturgy, the mass, most of the statues and rites and symbols with which the church had expressed the mystery and transcendence of God were swept out as so much magic. The Reformation was necessary but we must, I think, allow for the possibility that with the symbols the idea of God's mystery and transcendence disappeared as well. Protestant Churches became lecture halls, and by the twentieth century God, in some of them, was addressed as casually and flippantly as one of the folks.

We do well to learn from those branches of the church which see things differently. We are so precise and exacting in our tradition that a major faux pas is committed if our worship exceeds sixty minutes. The Black Church, in our culture has something to teach us about exuberance and celebration. My favorite story about the contrast comes from a remark made by one of our Executives, a Black man. Asked where he worshipped he replied, "Depends on the time of year. In the fall I attend a White Church; I like football and I can count on being out at noon. The rest of the year - a Black Church. You folks go to Church to get out - we go to worship and we don't go home till we're done." Or from the Scottish tradition - I'll never forget our summer leading worship in Kinlochleven: the service was very, very staid, reverent - it included five hymns, seven verses, sung slowly: but everyone sang, deliberately and vigorously. Or Eastern Orthodox tradition: their gorgeous, mysterious liturgies express the belief that in Heaven God is worshipped constantly. Public worship is simply the Church on Earth joining the service for a while - "a little bit of earth invading Heaven".

But meanwhile, in the mainline churches of the West, our emphasis has shifted from God, about whom we no longer feel comfortable talking, to humanity - about which we never tire of speaking. Theology has become anthropology: confession of sin has given way to self fulfillment: praising the God of Holiness and Majesty has been replaced by exploring the infinite varieties of the human potential movement. Hans Rudi Weber states flatly that we in the West are the first people in history who have trouble praying. Our dilemma was predicted in the last century

by the Danish theologian, Soren Kierkegaard, who wrote a now very familiar commentary on the attitudes of people as they attend worship. We go, Kierkegaard suggested, as if to the theater. We sit as an audience and our expectation is that something will be done for us and to us. We fully expect to be entertained, stimulated, inspired, made to laugh or cry. We are an audience: the players are the clergy and choir whose job it is to provide the show. God, if He has any part in this at all, is the prompter who on occasion, one hopes, catches the minister's ear and tells him what to say. That analysis, one hundred years old is, I continue to discover, distressingly contemporary.

True worship, Kierkegaard went one, maintains the idiom of theater. But it is God who is to be worshipped. He is the audience. The actors are the congregation who have come to do worship for God. The prompters are clergy and choir whose job it is to help the congregation. Preachers, obviously, delight in this simile because it can be used to excuse mediocrity. That is, I can preach a poor sermon, but that isn't why you came anyway so it doesn't matter. The point, however, is that true worship is something you do for God, and whether the sermon is good or poor, the anthem sweet or sour, you may still worship Him and do what you came here to do.

Now, toward a recovery of both ideas - God Near and God Far - in an experience that honestly reflects what we believe. It begins, I would suggest, with the sense of expectation you bring with you. Donald MacLeod suggests that we will not worship until we shift our focus from self to God. He writes: "We do not come to engage in exercises that are profitable to our souls, or to edify one another. We come to meet with God." (Word and Sacrament, p.108,112)

We have homework to do, that is to say, before we come here. We are going to meet Someone and we need to get ready. How you spend the moments before the service begins is terribly important.

There is a rhythm and a movement to Reformed Worship when it is done well. It is not simply a hit-or-miss series of separate acts surrounding or leading up to a sermon. This morning we are using the format recommended for Presbyterian Churches in the Worshipbook: it incorporates ideas from John Calvin, the early church and the Jewish traditions of the Old Testament. There are three distinct parts to this act of worship: The Approach, The Word and The Response of the People.

One of William Barclay's favorite stories involves a group of tourists in Germany visiting the room where Beethoven lived and worked. In the corner stood the piano over which he composed The Moonlight Sonata. An American girl rushed over to the instrument and thumped out the first movement, looking up with a sense of triumph. "You will be interested to know," the guide remarked, "that Paderewski himself was a visitor here last week." "Really," the girl replied, "I'll bet he did what I did: I'll bet he sat down and played the Sonata." "No", the guide said dryly, "he didn't. Everyone begged him to but he said,'I am not worthy.'"

There is something of that in The Approach. The first part of worship intends to express the most incredible and awesome fact of history: there is a God: a God of holiness and majesty whose name is best invoked with loud and joyful hymns of praise, processionals and doxologies. And then - if we have been lifted up by the spirit of that - we will want and need to express the distance. That is

the function of the Prayer of Confession. It is an acknowledgment of our humanity; not an obsessive celebration of our evil, but a simple confession that we are not God and that we rather consistently fail to live up to His expectations of us.

The second part expresses an equally incredible and awesome fact. The God we would worship has chosen to be in conversation with us. And so we listen to ancient words through which He has been addressing His people for thousands of years; to beautiful music offered to Him by part of our congregation and to us as another vehicle for His voice, and to the voice of one whose burden and deepest joy is to search for words through which God himself might choose to speak.

The climax, the highest point, is our response: our prayers, our verbalization of faith, and our offering of goods and self. It is not a collection of dues. In fact, given the common use of checking accounts most of the offerings are received in the office by mail. Nevertheless, the offering is the point of personal dedication and commitment regardless of the mechanics. It is our response to the grace of God we have been thinking and hearing about. It is the single most important act that is performed each week.

Because we are Presbyterians our worship is corporate. We need one another, we believe in worship. When we pray and sing and respond together we do so not simply as individuals who happen to be here at the same time, but as brothers and sisters bound together by our faith. Our prayers are not ours alone - they are the prayers of the Church: our hymns and creeds are more than personal - they express the faith and hope of this congregation of God's people.

Why bother? Why come to worship? There are a thousand answers to that. My very deepest conviction is that we are fully human only as we put our lives in relationship with the One who has created us: only as we acknowledge our humanity and His awesome infinity. Then, I believe deeply, we will know something of His love - this infinite God who has walked among us: this Almighty who wishes to be known as our Father: this God who calls us here - and promises to meet us here and have dealings with us.

Amen.

Eternal God, our Father, we are grateful for the privilege of worship. Lift up our hearts to mystery and majesty and then help us to know the miracle of Your presence in our midst. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.